

From the Director

May 17, 2005

Community Based placement of youth draws praise, reduces crowding


More than a month has passed since my last *From the Director* report and much has happened, most of it positive.

Oak Hill's population today is 159, down from 245 on February 27 and 209 when I issued my last *From the Director* report on March 23. For the many doubters out there who said that DYRS staff was not capable of making these kinds of dramatic changes in such a short time period, we've clearly proven them wrong. More importantly, for the workings of our own team, this substantial downsizing was accomplished through teamwork by staff from 450 H working jointly with Oak Hill staff and, increasingly, Court Social Services, the Department of Mental Health and community vendors. This in turn, allowed us to close both Modular II in March and Unit 6 in April.

By ourselves, none of this could have been accomplished; together as a team, we've achieved some very challenging outcomes in a very short period of time. I am also very happy to say that many staff have embraced the concept that "every day counts" and we are clearly seeing the impact of that culture change.

In writing about these achievements (closure of Unit 6, Modular II and the substantial decline in Oak Hill's population), **Special Arbiter Grace Lopes**, who had previously written several reports highly critical of DYRS' compliance with previous workplans stated, "Defendants' performance on the short term deliverables constitutes an important accomplishment. And while it cannot vitiate the troubling record in this case, it may herald the start of real progress toward compliance with the Court's orders and the Consent Decree."

In addition to drawing praise from the Special Arbiter (and notice in the Mayor's Office and amongst the judges and DC Council) the efforts to place youth in community based placements has begun, ever so slowly, to reduce forced overtime amongst staff, something loudly and justifiably complained about by staff 'drafted' involuntarily into overtime.



Overtime shot through the roof, rising from \$72,000 in October up to \$221,000 in February, when the population peaked and we had three facilities open instead of one. Since February, with a decline in Oak Hill's population and a slight increase in direct care staff, overtime declined both months, dropping to \$201,000 by April. While this is still far higher than October, our hope is that by adding staff and closing units, we'll have more people spread over fewer living units, reducing forced overtime, stress and staff burnout. We hope to close Unit 10b next, as soon as we are able to reduce Oak Hill's population sufficiently, thereby further reducing the stress attendant upon "drafting" and working short-handed.

Public safety and the safety of our young people

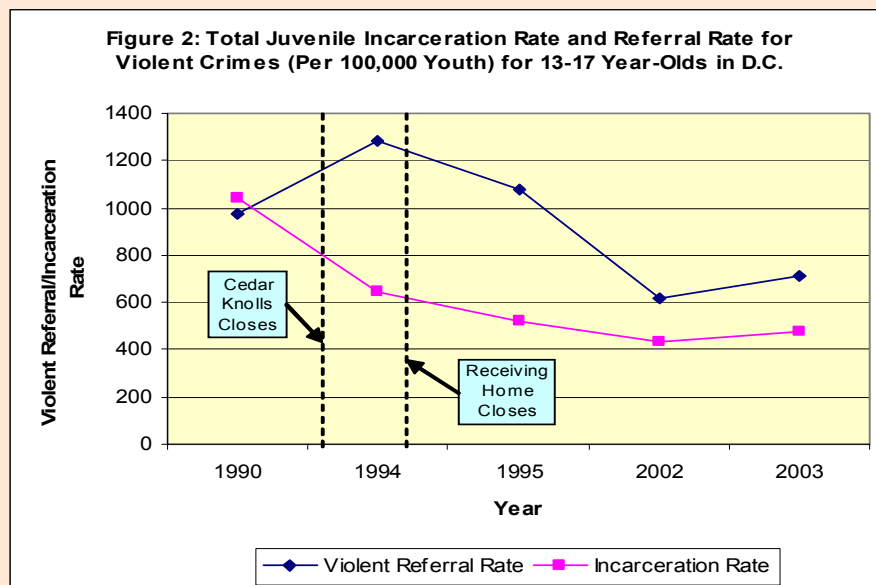
As we are reducing the number of young people incarcerated in the District, many staff have become concerned about what this means for the safety of our young people and public safety. These are critically important questions that we clearly must address if our reform efforts are to be successful and to have any credibility amongst the staff, the youth, their families and the community at large. The need for this becomes particularly clear and hits disturbingly close to home when one of our young people is released from locked custody and comes to harm, which has happened all too frequently in recent months.

DYRS' approach is to place young people in the least restrictive environment *consistent with public safety*. We are in the process of designing a continuum of care to meet the needs of the young people *and public safety* in the community, where appropriate, or in decent, humane and rehabilitative locked custody, where appropriate.

We have plenty of examples to work off of, the foremost being an effort that took place during the 1990s, right here in DC, with which many of you were involved. In the early 1990s, the District had an incarceration rate of 1,039 per 100,000 youth, held in three large, decrepit institutions. By 2004, that incarceration rate had been cut nearly in half, to 554 per 100,000, and two of those three institutions had been closed. In fact, the Cedar Knoll facility, which housed more than 200 youth at any given time, closed while violent juvenile crime

was still rising in D.C. To the surprise of many, the closure of Cedar Knoll and the Receiving Home was followed by steady decline in juvenile crime, especially violent offenses.

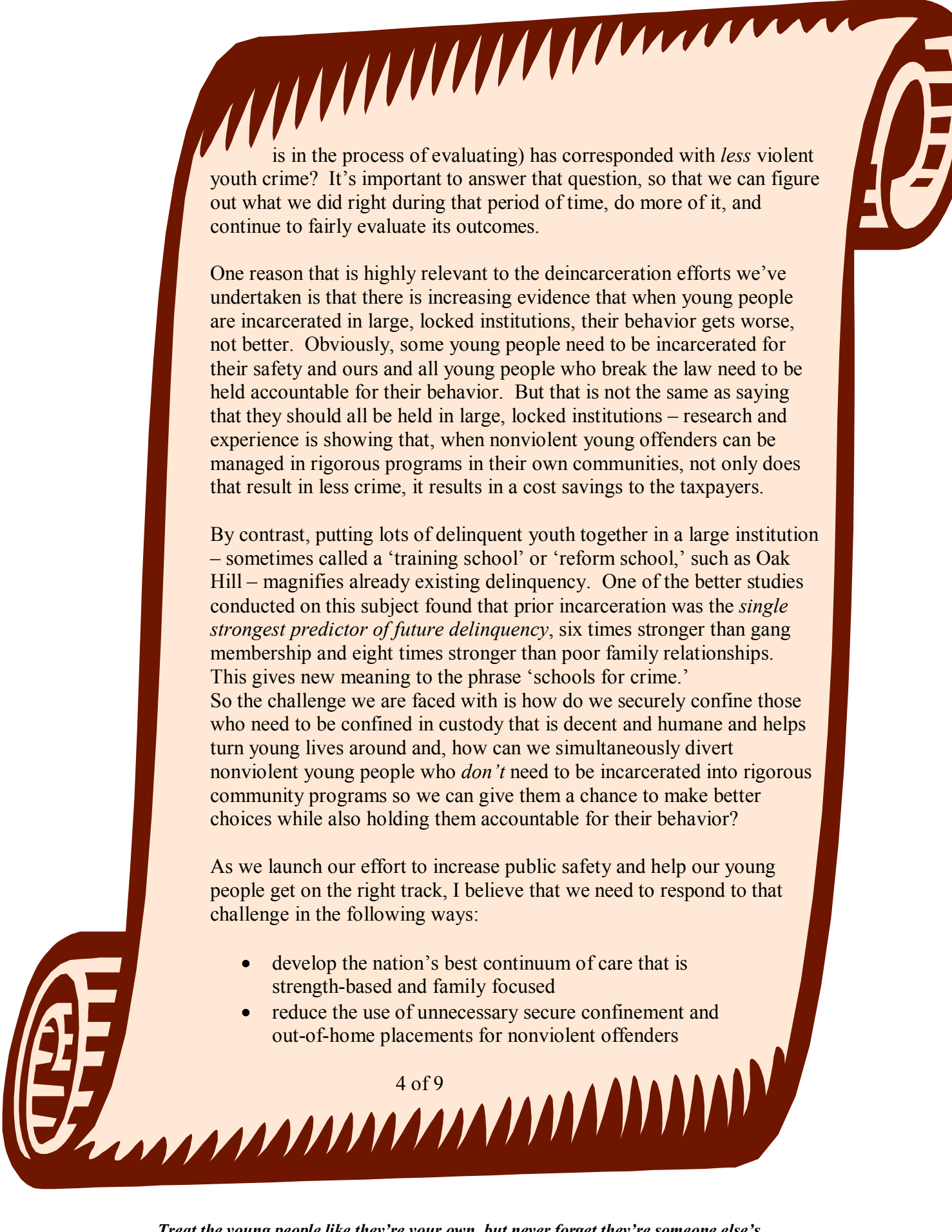
Youth crime in the District is down substantially since 1995, even though we're now locking up a lot fewer youth. According to a recent analysis by the Urban Institute, violent juvenile arrests in DC were 52% lower in 2003 than they were in 1995. Homicide arrests of juveniles dropped by 92% during this same time period, a very, very encouraging trend for the purposes of the work we're doing. (See Figures 2 below)* So, even though we're locking fewer youth up today, we've still witnessed a substantial decline in violent crime by young people.



This contrasts with what has been going on with adult crime and incarceration in DC during the same time period. The incarceration rate for adults has increased by 41% since 1990. If more incarceration leads to less crime, as some contend, we would expect that adult crime would have dropped by significantly more than juvenile crime. But the opposite has happened, while we were locking up fewer juveniles and more adults, juvenile crime dropped more, not less, than adult crime.

Why is it that less incarceration of young people in DC (and in several other jurisdictions like Chicago, Portland, and Missouri...that DYRS

* Note: since 2003, there has been an increase in juvenile homicides, but they are still significantly lower than there were in 1995, and that increase did not correspond with a substantial decline in the use of locked custody for young people.



is in the process of evaluating) has corresponded with *less* violent youth crime? It's important to answer that question, so that we can figure out what we did right during that period of time, do more of it, and continue to fairly evaluate its outcomes.

One reason that is highly relevant to the deincarceration efforts we've undertaken is that there is increasing evidence that when young people are incarcerated in large, locked institutions, their behavior gets worse, not better. Obviously, some young people need to be incarcerated for their safety and ours and all young people who break the law need to be held accountable for their behavior. But that is not the same as saying that they should all be held in large, locked institutions – research and experience is showing that, when nonviolent young offenders can be managed in rigorous programs in their own communities, not only does that result in less crime, it results in a cost savings to the taxpayers.

By contrast, putting lots of delinquent youth together in a large institution – sometimes called a 'training school' or 'reform school,' such as Oak Hill – magnifies already existing delinquency. One of the better studies conducted on this subject found that prior incarceration was the *single strongest predictor of future delinquency*, six times stronger than gang membership and eight times stronger than poor family relationships. This gives new meaning to the phrase 'schools for crime.' So the challenge we are faced with is how do we securely confine those who need to be confined in custody that is decent and humane and helps turn young lives around and, how can we simultaneously divert nonviolent young people who *don't* need to be incarcerated into rigorous community programs so we can give them a chance to make better choices while also holding them accountable for their behavior?

As we launch our effort to increase public safety and help our young people get on the right track, I believe that we need to respond to that challenge in the following ways:

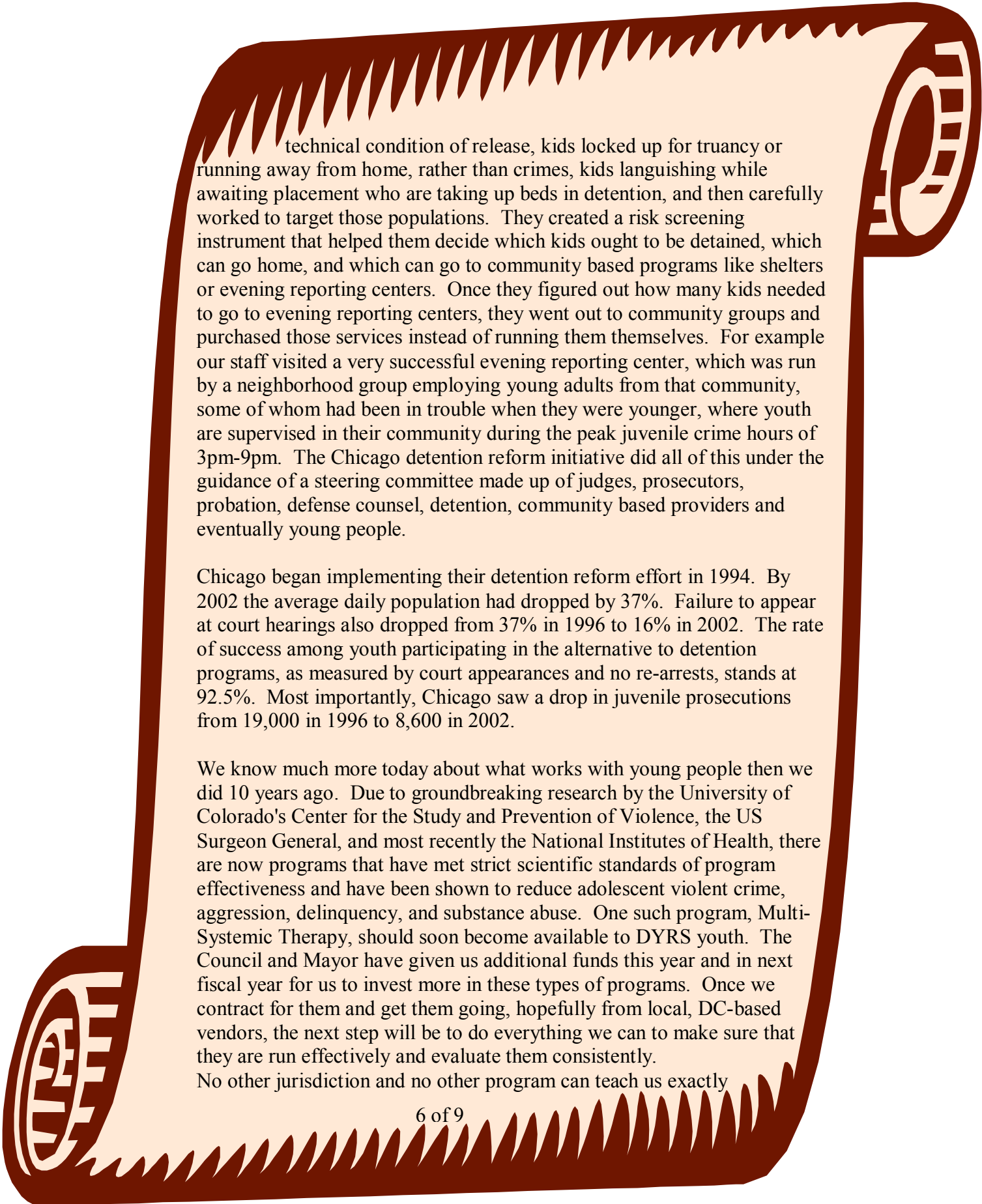
- develop the nation's best continuum of care that is strength-based and family focused
- reduce the use of unnecessary secure confinement and out-of-home placements for nonviolent offenders

- maximize family, youth, and staff input in our reform efforts
- increase interagency collaboration, and
- create a unit management model that substantially improves conditions in our secure programs, like the kind of model several of us recently witnessed in Missouri.

Although we are going to have to learn from *our own* experiences and come up with *our own* ideas, two jurisdictions to which numerous DYRS staff have recently traveled offer us some promising approaches – Missouri and Chicago, Illinois. Both jurisdictions have been getting a lot of attention for their efforts to balance public safety with decent and effective treatment for young people and, to my mind, rightly so.

In Missouri, the state went from having two brutal, large locked institutions in the 1980s, to having a network of small, decent and humane locked institutions close to the young people's home communities. The facilities generally hold no more than 20 – 40 youth, the kids and staff wear their own clothes and the facilities feel a lot more like a big house than a prison. They establish a strong culture of young people in the small groups holding each other accountable for their actions through a learning/teaching process called Guided Group Interaction. The young people we met with in St. Louis -- many of whom were charged with very serious offenses -- looked us in the eye, talked freely about their plans for the future including college and work, and generally there was an atmosphere of hope and promise for the future, rather than despair. A recent evaluation of the Missouri Model found that only 8% of graduates of the Missouri system get sent to adult prison within 3 years of program graduation. By comparison, in DC, among committed youth released from the Oak Hill Youth Center or private residential treatment centers to the community in 2001, 32% - four times as many -- were placed in adult prisons within 3 years. We are currently in negotiations with the Missouri folks to have them provide our department with training and technical assistance, including future visits to Missouri by line staff. I'll keep you all posted on the progress of these discussions.

In Chicago, we visited one of the model sites of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI). JDAI is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation* and focuses on youth in pretrial detention, creating a collaborative, data-driven approach to making appropriate use of detention facilities. In Chicago, they carefully analyzed the various sub-populations in their detention facility, including kids locked up for violating some

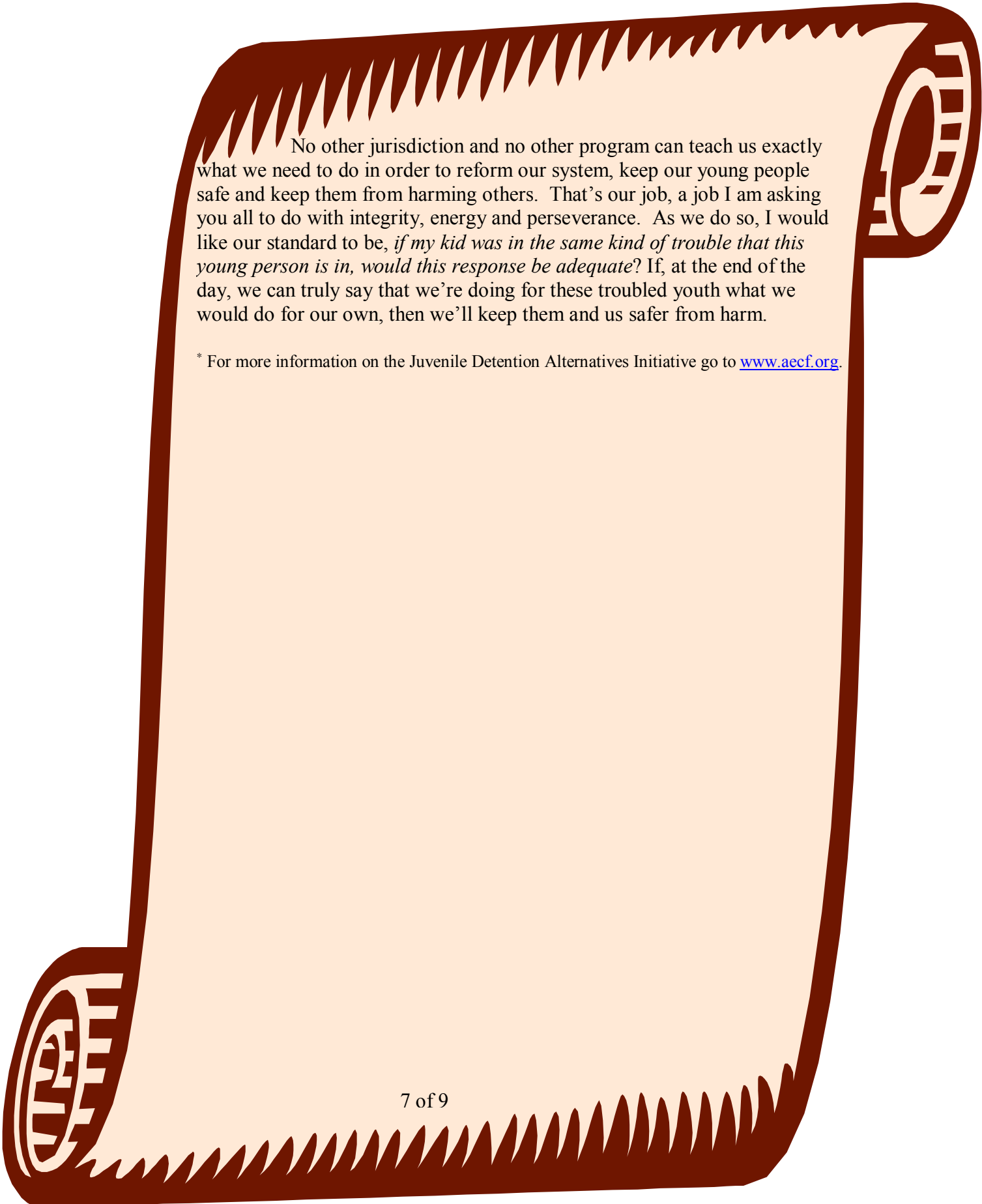


technical condition of release, kids locked up for truancy or running away from home, rather than crimes, kids languishing while awaiting placement who are taking up beds in detention, and then carefully worked to target those populations. They created a risk screening instrument that helped them decide which kids ought to be detained, which can go home, and which can go to community based programs like shelters or evening reporting centers. Once they figured out how many kids needed to go to evening reporting centers, they went out to community groups and purchased those services instead of running them themselves. For example our staff visited a very successful evening reporting center, which was run by a neighborhood group employing young adults from that community, some of whom had been in trouble when they were younger, where youth are supervised in their community during the peak juvenile crime hours of 3pm-9pm. The Chicago detention reform initiative did all of this under the guidance of a steering committee made up of judges, prosecutors, probation, defense counsel, detention, community based providers and eventually young people.

Chicago began implementing their detention reform effort in 1994. By 2002 the average daily population had dropped by 37%. Failure to appear at court hearings also dropped from 37% in 1996 to 16% in 2002. The rate of success among youth participating in the alternative to detention programs, as measured by court appearances and no re-arrests, stands at 92.5%. Most importantly, Chicago saw a drop in juvenile prosecutions from 19,000 in 1996 to 8,600 in 2002.

We know much more today about what works with young people than we did 10 years ago. Due to groundbreaking research by the University of Colorado's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, the US Surgeon General, and most recently the National Institutes of Health, there are now programs that have met strict scientific standards of program effectiveness and have been shown to reduce adolescent violent crime, aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse. One such program, Multi-Systemic Therapy, should soon become available to DYRS youth. The Council and Mayor have given us additional funds this year and in next fiscal year for us to invest more in these types of programs. Once we contract for them and get them going, hopefully from local, DC-based vendors, the next step will be to do everything we can to make sure that they are run effectively and evaluate them consistently.

No other jurisdiction and no other program can teach us exactly



No other jurisdiction and no other program can teach us exactly what we need to do in order to reform our system, keep our young people safe and keep them from harming others. That's our job, a job I am asking you all to do with integrity, energy and perseverance. As we do so, I would like our standard to be, *if my kid was in the same kind of trouble that this young person is in, would this response be adequate?* If, at the end of the day, we can truly say that we're doing for these troubled youth what we would do for our own, then we'll keep them and us safer from harm.

* For more information on the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative go to www.aecf.org.



SUCCESS STORIES

YSC Youth Shine at “Mother’s Day Explosion”

Voices and Motion Players (VAMP) teamed up with over 30 youth from YSC and DYRS staff on May 7 (the day before Mother’s Day) for a “Mother’s Day Explosion” of song, dance, poetry and fun. The community room at YSC was packed to overflowing with parents, grandparents, siblings, boyfriends and girlfriend and sometimes, children, of the young people confined at YSC.

The song, mime, dance and poetry that I witnessed proved that the young people in our care are capable of great things if given an opportunity and a little help from adults. One girl at YSC wrote poignantly about her struggle and what it means to be locked up over Mother’s Day: *We really love our mom and it ain’t just my heart has accepted a lot of things. My mom is real skinny. Comes from all that drinking and stress. God, please don’t let it be time for her to rest or we going to miss her if it is...Please God and Judge ----, set me free. You can’t sit in here looking at the wall just thinking about when my daughter first crawled. You miss home and sometimes I be wanting to be alone cause my life seems gone!!! Thank you for your time.*

Kudos to **Nate Williams** for allowing this event to occur in the community room at YSC, where youth are not generally permitted, and to the many DYRS staff who came in on their day off or otherwise helped pull this event off flawlessly.

Special congratulations to VAMP’s **Lennie Smith** and **Carmen White** and all the VAMP staff for their wonderful work with our youth and the beautiful decorations they prepared for the day’s events. The brochure prepared by VAMP summed up their feelings about this event, feelings which were clearly shared by the staff and parents in attendance, “On behalf of Voices & Motion Players, we gently, calmly, silently would like to express how proud we are of who you are and who you’re yet to become.”

Alert YSC Staff Helps Rescue Fellow Worker

Special thanks and congratulations are due to **Yieshia Ward** of the Youth Services Center. Working in the Control Unit this past Saturday, Ms. Ward observed an altercation between a lone staff on one of the pods and called for back-up in an already serious situation that might have been much worse absent her quick thinking and quick actions.

Pregnant Girl Thriving in the Community due to Quick DYRS Intervention

17-year-old TC was arrested and detained this month, despite the fact that she was nine months pregnant. At the time of her arrest, the judge was opposed to her going home to her mother. DYRS staff were very concerned that she would have the baby while in custody and the baby would be placed in the neglect system. **Jose Dearteaga** went into court and convinced the judge to allow us to place her in St. Ann’s Infant and Maternity Home, with the support of psychiatrist **Mike Kronen**. TC delivered a beautiful healthy baby girl and remained at St. Ann’s for another few weeks. Our main focus was to try to prevent mom and baby from being separated from one another. We were able to ultimately convince the judge to allow TC to return home, so that at no time was she taken away from her baby. Dr. Kronen began seeing her for treatment while she was at St. Ann’s and she was given in-home family services through CBI while there. CBI and Dr. Kronen have continued to provide

Treat the young people like they’re your own, but never forget they’re someone else’s.

services to her in the community. The bottom line is that a girl headed for residential and a baby headed into the neglect system have avoided both and are in the community getting services and doing fairly well. Though she still has issues and life is a struggle for her, it could have been so much worse.

Going the Extra Mile in Avoiding Unnecessary Detention

On Saturday, May 7 a 13-year-old boy was pending release from D.C. Superior Court new referrals courtroom. He had been arrested the previous day and subsequently held overnight at YSC. He was transported to the new referral court for arraignment however; the offenses that lead to his arrest were not papered by the OAG. CSS had attempted to reach the boy's father with no success.

Tracey Avent overheard the discussion, inquired about the young man's address and learned that he lived within a 20-minute walk from the court. The duty probation officer exhibited confidence in Tracey's problem solving spirit by requesting that she try to locate the parent.

Tracey walked to the father's house, bringing him back to the court and avoiding the need to return the boy to YSC. Tracey is aware of the DYRS goal to reduce detention and saw this as a part of her job, going the extra mile to avoid this boy's unnecessary confinement.